

The Public Schools Cannot Do It Alone

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I attempted to call attention to a long-term and continuing concern of mine in a “letter to the editor” to the Birmingham News when my two children were in elementary and middle schools in Tuscaloosa in an article entitled, “The Unrealistic Expectations for Our Public Schools.” At that time, I was employed by the University of Alabama in administrative roles in the College of Education with part-time academic responsibility as a professor of educational leadership. I revisited the concern in an updated version to the Gainesville Times (GA) in the mid 1980s after becoming president of Gainesville College under a revised and more focused title, “The Public Schools Can Not Do It Alone.” I am moved on this Sunday morning to revisit the concern primarily based upon the continuing comprehensive investigative coverage of the cheating scandal in the Atlanta Public Schools by the Atlanta Journal and Constitution (AJC).

Writing for the AJC Editorial Board in early summer of 2013, Maureen Downey concluded that “(Superintendent) Hall’s fate rests with the courts. The fate of the children of the APS rests with the community-parents, educators and policymakers and its willingness to demand learning-centered classrooms for its most vulnerable children rather than mind-numbing worksheets.”

That position allows me to conclude that collectively “We” have not learned much over the past 35+ years since I first wrote to the editor about my concern. In my opinion, her concluding and challenging statement is too narrowly written. It seems to say to me that the “public schools are at fault and that things can be fixed if we just demand more from them.” Such will not be the case unless we develop a “Grand We” approach that begins with caring concern in a family environment for all young children from the beginning. Far too many youngsters in today’s social order are coming into this world without such a supportive beginning and are literally, almost left to fend for themselves in an increasingly complex world. Not wishing to possibly hurt by concerns with some by noting that Hillary Clinton’s most profound position over time has been her “belief that it takes a whole community to raise a child.”

Embedded in an early paragraph in that first letter was my recalling a grocery store checkout incident when a mother, totally frustrated by the behavior of her five year old in her grocery cart, exclaimed loudly to the clerk that “I will be so glad when he starts to school next year so I will be able to blame them for his behavior.” I concluded then and restated as the thesis of a letter to the AJC that Sunday morning my belief, based upon soon to be 55 years working on behalf of public education at some level, that there is probably more fact than fiction implied by that story despite the presence of evidence that behavior patterns, attitudes and value orientations and potential for development have been decidedly influenced before a child begins his formal schooling in the first grade. It might be worth adding, that I was not surprised when the submission was not acknowledged or subsequently used by the AJC.

The never-ending discussions of the “Nature vs. Nurture” issue supports the cruciality of parental, grandparent, other significant adult and sibling influences during the early years in a supportive home environment is an example of the factors external to the school which seem to have been lost as one struggles to put the responsibilities of the school in a more balanced perspective.

Other influencing factors in the development of children which could be discussed in a similar manner include the church (i.e. providing financial support for emergency financial needs and encouraging volunteering), the neighborhood peers (i.e. recognizing that children will be children and encouraging the use of available spaces such as a cul-de-sac turnaround as a play area and supporting each other across family lines in growing our children), community groups such as scouts, organized athletic teams, and other recreational options (i.e. finding ways to make participation in such more readily available across socio-economic lives with attention to diversity of participants), and the media, particularly television (i.e. encouraging more responsibility of such outlets in what is put out there for children to view despite growing technical means for “responsible adults” to monitor what children see).

Reflectively, when one looks back over the increasing “laundry list” of responsibilities of the public schools, being singled out almost as the single agent of social change through school desegregation, the growing use of and abuse of drugs, the challenges of sex education in a society with a deteriorating family structure, driver education with increasing accident/highway deaths, growing concern with health problems/obesity among children, the increasing technological revolution and the overwhelming challenge of dealing with all manners of educational and developmental challenges of students who show up at the schoolhouse door, one should not be surprised that the public schools are struggling to meet the challenges and the “unrealistic expectations” that are held for them.

As one with over 50 years of work in trying to improve public education at all levels, I take the position that the public schools as we know them today across the boards, notwithstanding incidents like the APS testing scandal, are dealing with an overwhelming degree of challenges, with less parental/family/community support than ever and because of tightening economic conditions less relative financial support with which to meet the expectations much more effectively than at any time in the last 50 years. Keep in mind that I first started when schooling for Black children was literally a “missionary effort” in many parts of the South and developmentally challenged children were not sent to school or were put in a row next to the window and kept busy primarily, “taught” with “blue ditto” sheets.

While agreeing with the contention by many that the emphasis upon test scores and the instructional and curriculum rigidity caused by the “No Child Left Behind” movement, while well-intentioned have had dysfunctional results and have created additional problems for and expectations for the public schools, I continue to conclude that as a society, we must accept larger individual and collective responsibility in helping the schools out of the position of being “Society’s Whipping Post” and the recipient of “Unrealistic Expectations”!

Again, and in closing these recurring “reflections based primarily upon practice over time,” I know that the schools cannot change these expectations alone. However, they could take some small steps in broadening the base of support for their efforts if school leaders at the local school level guard against a tendency to circle the wagons and return to a time when too many principals contributed to the isolation of the schools by saying to the parents and the community: “Send your children to us—Stay out of our way—We can fix all problems”!

Regrettably, this writer ran into such a mentality when he visited a local area elementary school in an effort to develop a supportive relationship between his small neighborhood church and the local public elementary school that serves the area—an area that encompasses a full range of economic and social situations. On the fourth visit, a discussion with an assistant principal who had recently completed her entry-level graduate work in a regional public institution and was in her first administrative position, gave me HOPE again for the future. My visit with her made up

for the emails that were not responded to, the telephone calls not returned and the “waiting time” when the principal was on the phone and never seemed to be able to get to me. I am also aware that my minister and a committed former elementary school teacher had been received in similar manners by school staff during earlier contacts with this school.

Reference

Downey, M. (2013, May 3). We'll have to wait a year for APS trial. *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. Available at <http://www.ajc.com/weblogs/getschooled/2013/may/03/well-have-wait-year-aps-trial/>